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# THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

## THE CHOICE OF WALL PAPERS.

BY LEWIS F. DAY.



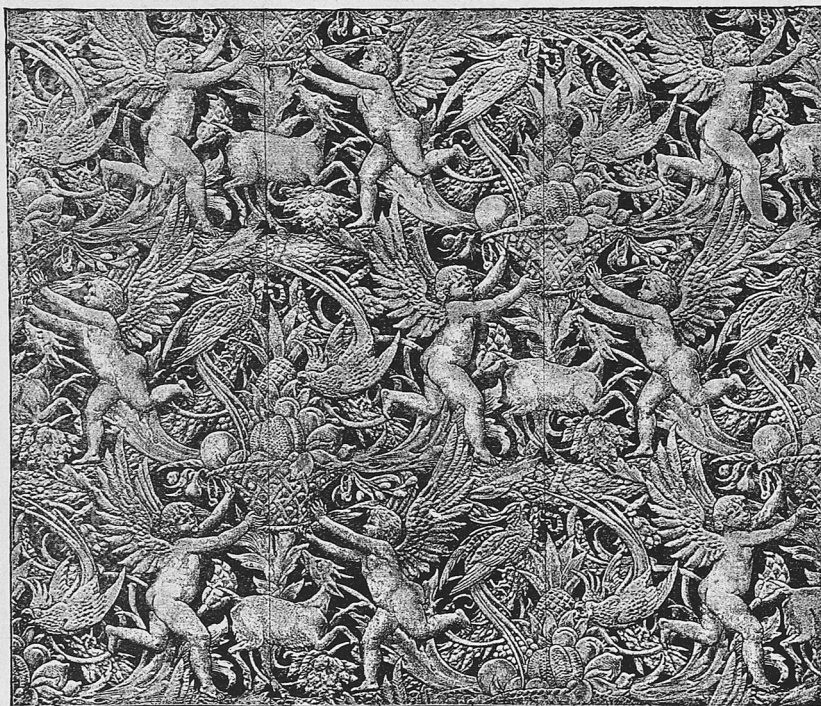
ALTHOUGH wall paper is in the nature of a makeshift; it is but a substitute for decoration of a more serious and substantial kind. No one would pretend that it has the dignity of wall painting. But it has, if not the effect of wall painting, much of its effectiveness, and, so long as we lease our houses and improve them at our own expense to the profit of the owner, wall paper may be considered indispensable to the "tenantable repair" of an ordinary middle-class dwelling.

The choice of wall papers has, accordingly, very much to

have any artistic qualification at all (and who is there who will confess to the lack of it?), he will certainly be able to do better than accept the first thing put before him, or the last thing "out."

The initial difficulty in selection arises from the number of patterns there are to choose from. Of making many books—even pattern books—there is no end. Life is not long enough, there is not time to see everything, nor yet one tithe of what is produced—even though one were to take wall paper decoration so seriously as to think it worth while.

The "decorator" simplifies matters by showing to you only "this year's goods," and the patterns of only a limited number of manufacturers—not, perhaps, always the best. It is to his interest, obviously, to sell that which he has in stock, and on which, for this or other reasons, he gets most profit. He is unduly prejudiced, too, in favor of the current fashion, whatever it may be. If, then, you want to give your choice fair play, what you have to do is to find out the names of the best paper



PRESSED LEATHER WALL HANGING, ENTITLED THE GOLDEN AGE, DESIGNED BY WALTER CRANE.

do with the appearance of our rooms, and becomes, relatively, an important consideration. It is, moreover, something to which the householder can attend himself, and should attend—nay, must attend, if he care at all about his surroundings. The choice, for example, between cheerful coloring and low tones, between warm color and cold, between light and dark, is one for his own personal consideration; it is a question not of art or taste, but of liking, and for him, therefore, to determine.

Even as regards art, although a man's taste may indicate only a lack of taste, he is likely to be at least as good a judge as the salesman who turned over the pattern-book; and if he

stainers, and insist upon seeing their books—not merely those of the current year, but of several years past. A decorator fit to be employed will probably have them put away somewhere out of sight, and, if he has not, he can always borrow them from the manufacturer for you to see; and when he finds that you are not otherwise to be satisfied he will make no further difficulty about it. It should be mentioned, however, that two or three of the manufacturers to whom application was made for the purpose of this notice did not send specimens for review, and some either did not send their best, or are not producing such good things as they once did. The useful design by Scott,

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Cuthbertson & Co. on this page is of the rather harmless kind, which is happily common enough nowadays, yet it is the best they sent.

Another difficulty arises from the fact that, even with the pattern-book before you, you have to choose from them, not the pattern which there pleases you best, but that which will best satisfy you on the wall—which is quite another thing; for, since it is from the pattern-book you buy, the pattern-book is naturally got up with a view rather to what there will be pleasing than to what will form effective decoration.

Accordingly, the fault common to the greater part of wall paper patterns is that they aim too particularly at finish. Breadth, which is the desideratum, is sacrificed to quite useless delicacy of detail. It is a fact that some of the most absolutely satisfactory wall papers never sell from the pattern-book at all; it is only when they are seen on a screen about the size of a wall that the purchaser understands in the least what their effect will be *in situ*. If you are in doubt about the size of a pattern, be sure it is too small; if you hesitate about its

the wall. That did not matter much in fabrics meant to hang in folds; and the designers of old did not take what may have seemed to them the superfluous trouble of getting over a defect belonging more or less to the loom; but if paper stainers reproduce these designs, they might at least correct them in this respect. And before you settle upon any such design for your walls, it would be as well to look out for any indication in it of a vertical stripe likely to occur where the breadths of paper meet.

I had some thoughts of illustrating the modern tendency to reproduce old stuffs—good, bad and indifferent—by examples of the work of various manufacturers (they are more or less sinners for the most part), but I found the things on the whole, not only uninteresting but so familiar that it did not seem worth while. One has had enough of them; and it would hardly have been fair to sacrifice to them work which, good or bad, represents, at all events, the effort of the day in direction of wall paper design.

Moreover, if I had illustrated a reproduction of A & Co.'s,



ALLEGORICAL FIGURE IN MOSAIC, REPRESENTING THE AIR, DESIGNED BY WALTER ORANÉ.

finish, be sure it is too full of work; the thing to beware against is prettiness. Be bold to choose the big, broad thing—it is scarcely likely to be too big or too broad—your danger lies the other way, in the direction of the finikin.

The patterns of the last year or two cannot be said to show any marked advance in taste. A certain reaction in favor of the later, looser French styles of decoration has brought into the market a number of designs which fifteen years ago no one pretending to taste would have endured. A manufacturer confessed to me not long ago that he had of late years brought out from the lumber store old blocks which were in use before the Exhibition of 1851, and used them again very much to his profit. That is not encouraging. Even the more cultivated producers, who would prefer to bring out only the best original work, feel themselves compelled (I do not say they are) to reproduce old silks and velvets if they wish to keep their factories going. Some of the old damask designs make, it is true, admirable wall papers *but* for the vertical stripes they take on

B & Co. might have felt aggrieved that I had not shown *their* reproduction of the same original—for the same pattern has sometimes been brought out by two or more rival firms, much to their disappointment. The truth is, unhappily or happily, the textile museums of Europe have been ransacked for models, and the fine things have all been reproduced—unhappily, because some manufacturers have taken to reproducing what is second or third-rate, happily because one sees now some hope that there may be a reaction in favor of design *vice* reproduction no longer profitable. Where an old pattern is better than we can do, that is at least an excuse for its reproduction; where it is not, the antiquity of the forms used is no excuse for their unshapeliness. Old designs often leave much to be desired in the matter of drawing, even where there is no absolute occasion for modification to fit them for the purpose of paper-hangings.

The severer styles of design have been, as I said, in a measure, "worked out" (so far as reproduction is concerned). There is just now an attempt on the part of some leading firms

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of decorators to "run" once more the later French styles; and firms that are not in an any sense "leading," but the reverse, are following in their direction. That persons of unperverted taste will follow this lead is, I think, most unlikely. Those who do will find themselves very certainly before long under the necessity of undoing what they have rashly done in the way of decoration, which is just what the decorator desires. On his part, he may find too late that he has outwitted himself, when people bethink themselves that it may be as well to go straight to Paris for what the Frenchman does so much better than we can. Our safety is in doing what we can do best.

Whether or not the styles of Louis XIV., or of Louis XV., or of Louis XVI., will quite meet the wants of Mr. Smith, he himself must decide. Leaving out of account the "Rococo" (there is no occasion to insult the readers of the journal by supposing them so far fallen away from seriousness as that), there is no doubt that the work of Louis XVI.'s time is often rich enough, that done under Louis XVI. sometimes very delicate, but the richness of the one, and the delicacy of the other, as seen in subtly-colored silk or satin, or in exquisitely painted panels, such as French monarchs could command—all this is lost in mere wall-paper, which, as a matter of fact, does not lend itself to such rivalry, or only at a cost which it is not worth doing. If you really must have Louis XVI., you had better paint your walls, or hang them with silk and not paper them. Needless to say that such wall decoration, to be anything more than a caricature of the real thing, must naturally cost many times the price of the most extravagant thing ever done in the way of wall-paper, which is about the least costly although the most effective, item in house decoration. It is a big house in which the papers, even though you choose the best of their kind, will cost a hundred pounds; but a hundred pounds does not go far when it comes to what is called "painting and decorating."

That we are not dependent upon any "historic" style for nineteenth century design, has been shown by Mr. Wm. Morris, Mr. Walter Crane and others—some of them not very well known to fame. Mr. Morris was one of the first, if not the first, to show the way to better things in wall-paper design. He had a way of his own and the courage to persist in it; and perhaps some of us who have gone our own way have been encouraged by his example. It was to some extent his doing that wall-papers began to attract attention.

One of the greatest charms of his papers apart from their merits of design, is that they are his; for all their very considerable variety, each one of them is stamped with his individuality. There is no concession on his part to the passing craze for "Adams" or "Queen Anne," or whoever it may be who reigns for the moment in Bond Street, or Tottenham Court Road. The manner, whether it be to your liking or not, is the manner of the man, Morris.

One word of caution may be given as to the selection of a paper, even by Mr. Morris. He has a strong liking for marked lines on his papers. I do not object to that myself (if the lines are right), but many persons do, and it may be a disappointment to them to see on the wall horizontal or other bands of color for which the pattern shown did not prepare them. If you prefer an "all over" effect, it will be as well to look out for those lines, and to select something of his in which there is no danger of lines too emphatic for you. The opinion of any fairly intelligent artist as to the safety of a given design, in this respect, is worth taking: his experience helps him to anticipate results which you can hardly be expected to foresee; but if you notice a line at all in the sample, you may be quite sure that it will be increasingly evident on the wall.

It was astonishing to find, when it came to comparing the patterns sent by various makers for review, how much alike some of them were—as if the half dozen or so of designers had been employed by rival manufacturers. One came upon various variations of the very same design—I should say obviously the same hand, but that firms, even of good repute are not always above "borrowing" designs which their competitors have honestly paid for; and I may therefore be attributing to want of invention on the part of the artist, what is due really to the "advanced" commercial ideas of his employer.

Of the work of Jeffrey & Co. it is difficult for me to speak, as I have for some years past designed for them, but I may

say, without fear of favoring them, that among actual producers (which Morris & Co. are not) they certainly take the lead in design, some of the artists whom they first prevailed upon to design for them having since been sought after by less enterprising competitors.

The name of Essex & Co. deserves also to be included among those few manufacturers who seem to have convictions, and the courage of them. They have produced a striking pattern book; their designs have character—that character, if I mistake not, of Mr. Voysey. The originality is a little strained at times, and there is a tendency in their work to insist upon a certain *naïveté* which verges now and then upon the childish, as in the case of a staircase decoration of theirs which consists of a paper imitation of small bricks, dark for the dado and light for the upper wall, which suggests the doll's house rather than serious decoration; but, take it on the whole, their papers are a relief from, and a timely protest against the heterogeneous collection of papers in the pattern books of some perhaps better known paper stainers and dealers, any one of whose productions might just as well have been produced by any other firm, for all the individual character there is about them.

The fashion of the moment, over and above the craze for imitation of seventeenth and eighteenth century silks, is in favor of enormously large designs. There is reason in that, especially as a protest against the popular prejudice in favor of unduly small patterns. Messrs. Hayward & Sons have brought out some papers which are certainly very bold, and need only judicious use to be most effective on the wall.

Large in style again, and characteristic, also, in their way, although in great part taken or adapted from old plaster work, are Mr. Scott Morton's designs for Tynecastle canvas, of which further mention is reserved.

Almost every one, in fact, has lately brought out giant patterns, as well as imitations of old stuffs. Messrs. Arthur & Co., who have gone out of their way to produce a wall-paper of exceptional width, for the purpose, it would seem, of getting flowers of impossible dimensions, have rather overstepped the mark. The huge scale of their designs one might accept, but the choice of natural flowers for representation on that unnatural scale is surely a mistake in taste. Flowers twice as large as life, or more, lose all the charm of nature. They remind one rather unpleasantly of Mr. Lemuel Gulliver; and the naturalistic treatment of floral forms—in itself at least questionable when it comes to their mechanical multiplication, as in wall-paper—strikes one as inconsistent with that largeness of treatment which the scale here adopted leads us to expect.

Let those who prefer floral forms choose, by all means, according to their liking. I think, however, that even those who do not see the objection which some of us (who have at least given some thought to the subject) have to the repetition of the same natural flower or flower group, over and over again, will find, when they come to *live* with such repetition, that forms less pronouncedly natural are more restful to the eye. One may admire a clever bit of flower painting, and appreciate the skill with which it is produced in color-painting, and yet resent its "damnable iteration" all over the wall.

And there is another thing. In seeking natural effect the designer is apt to forget, if he do not altogether despise, the consideration of the *effect in repetition* upon which the success of wall-paper as decoration so entirely depends. It is no easy matter, even for the experienced and accomplished designer, to foresee and provide against all the dangers incident to the repetition of a pattern. In the case of ornament, in which there is no pretence of adhering to natural effect, he can, however, at all events devote himself unrestrainedly to the decorative purposes he has in view; whereas, the aim of the flower painter who would make a pattern of natural flowers is divided. His success in naturalistic rendering is very possibly at the cost of design. Besides, the choice of a natural motive does not even argue that the man has had any care for decorative effect—which the mere ornamentalist tries for at least.

It may be worth remembering, then, that of the two kinds of patterns the chances are that the more conventional design is likely to bear repetition better, and to produce the more satisfactory effect upon the wall.